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SUBJECT: JORDAN: DISCONTENT AMONG YOUTH IN AJLOUN

REF: AMMAN 276

1.) (SBU) On January 27, Pol Chief and Pol Specialist traveled to Ajloun, where they met with the mayor and participants in a USAID-funded program administered by the International Republican Institute (IRI) to promote civic participation. Both meetings yielded insight on current youth attitudes towards politics and the local economy. The mayor's comments on electoral reform and decentralization were reported in reftel.

Mayor Deeply Concerned About Increased Radicalization

2) (C) In a frank and private conversation covering a range of topics (septel), Mayor Mamdooh Mustafa Al Zghool raised specific concerns about factors that are contributing to the radicalization of youth in Ajloun:

- a high poverty rate
- increasing unemployment, which is currently at about 18) 20 percent
- poor delivery of public services
- lack of equal opportunity

The last item is of greatest concern to the mayor. He believes that the current system fails to reward youth achievement and initiative, which results in a sense of frustration and depression. The mayor also believes that Ajloun youth, who distrust national institutions and feel they have no role in national or local decision-making processes, turn reluctantly to tribal connections to secure employment, educational opportunities, and other services.

3.) (C) These factors have combined to produce increased radicalization in Ajloun, although the mayor did not define the term or attribute radicalization activities to any specific organization. He believes that until the macro-level problems are solved, radicalization in Ajloun will only continue to increase.

Youth Frustration with the Status Quo

4.) (SBU) PolChief and Pol Specialist also met with a local youth committee at an IRI-administered office to promote youth civic engagement and public service. Participants confirmed the low opinion that many Ajloun youth hold about public officials.

-- One speaker said that local MPs and others in power simply will not listen to youth. While it is hard for them to get meetings to discuss new ideas and initiatives, access is occasionally granted when leaders learn that the youth are associated with a USG-funded capacity-building program.

"When we mention IRI, it becomes hard for them to ignore us."

-- Another speaker spoke of how MPs' long-standing personal rivalries could also derail a proposal. In one specific instance, an MP refused to support a youth proposal for a public library because the MP had a feud with one of the other supporters. "Their disagreements stand in the way of progress."

Request for youth resources

5.) (SBU) Both the mayor and the youth activists requested additional resources, particularly a cultural center and children's library for Ajloun. The mayor wants a "safe place" for Ajloun youth to gather and express themselves in productive ways.

6.) (SBU) When asked if social media is used to build support for these initiatives, the youth said that Facebook and Twitter were not common tools. They said that many residents of Ajloun do not have personal computers and were unfamiliar with Facebook and Twitter. The young activists themselves knew of Facebook, but said they most often communicate with their peers using cell phones and SMS messages.
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